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# Experiments in democratic participation: feminist printshop collectives

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## ABSTRACT

Relatively cheap and accessible, digital technologies have facilitated both social movements and the individual ‘citizen’ commentator not only in the production of alternative and critical discourses but also in the potential to connect to a global public. As Jenny Kidd in a recent issue of this journal has noted (along with many others), much has been and continues to be made of the ‘democratic potential’ of accessible networked information technologies. However, little over 30 years ago direct access to simple printing technology was also perceived as facilitating contestatory and empowering alternatives to the forms and practices of dominant media and culture. Print, it should be remembered, was in many parts of the world and for much of the twentieth century (at the very least), the main form for radical, democratic and alternative critical media practice. This article examines the output and practices of two London-based feminist printing collectives that operated between the 1970s and early 1990s and for whom the principles of democratic participation and access were central. Their activities are discussed in relation to the specific, changing and sometimes challenging, politico-cultural contexts in which they existed.

## KEY WORDS

participation, feminism, 1970s-1980s, posters, printshop collectives

## INTRODUCTION

This article draws on my ongoing research into the late twentieth century history of UK radical and community printshop collectives. The issue of ‘democracy’ was at the heart of these organisations, not only in terms of *what* was produced and *how*, but—for some groups in particular—for *whom* and *by whom*. The dominant membership of many printshops was reflective of the leftist cultural-political scenes from which they emerged; in other words, university or college educated, white, mostly middle-class and often male. However, although rarely a majority, women were in fact key participants in many organisations. Furthermore, and perhaps unsurprisingly given that the appearance of the printshops coincided with the emergence of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the UK, a number of women-only printshops were set up by feminists.

The issues of access and participation are, albeit in different ways, defining ones of any political movement concerned with equality and self-determination. In the case of the women’s movement(s) in the UK, this was not only so in the campaigns against the legal and social structures that restricted women’s involvement in public life but also in relation to participation in the movement itself. The historical and specific case of the women’s printshops, by way of (necessarily imperfect) example, offers an opportunity to raise, if not answer, specific questions about some of the constituents of an alternative democratic media practice.

What follows is firstly an historical and contextual overview along with a general description of radical and community printshops. The focus then turns to the women-only printshops, highlighting the statements and practices of two particular London-based collectives,

Lenthall Road Workshop (1975–1993) and See Red Women’s Workshop (1974–1990). The article draws on the author’s interviews with former participants from both organisations as well as surviving documents and posters from the interviewees’ and the author’s personal collections. Individual interviews were carried out in 2011 with five women from Lenthall Road, who were involved with the workshop at different times between 1981 and 1993 and four women who were part of See Red for different periods of time between 1981 and 1990. Source material was drawn from the See Red archive held at the Women’s Library based at London Metropolitan University.

## BACKGROUND

In both Europe and North America between the late 1960s and 1970s, numerous politically motivated, collectively run printing workshops were set up to facilitate the cheap and sympathetic production of radical materials. In the UK, most cities had at least one of these printshops (Kenna *et al.* 1986) and by 1982, in London alone there were at least thirty such places. They mostly started on a voluntary basis, with donated or cheaply acquired equipment in either rent-free spaces (often squats) or low-rent premises. An early poster (Figure 1) from one of the printshops, See Red Women’s Workshop (1974–1990), makes the imperative explicit: ‘The freedom of the press belongs to those who control the press’. (The slogan on the poster is of course a productivist and feminist rendition of the well-known statement by A. J. Liebling).

These printshops emerged out of a specific historical conjunction of technological possibility and political and cultural imperatives: the availability of screen-printing and small offset litho technologies and the cultural-political developments of post-1968 radical politics. Both screen-printing and small offset were relatively cheap and learnable technologies — in fact screen-printing equipment can be made by hand. Screen-printing facilities had begun to appear in art schools in

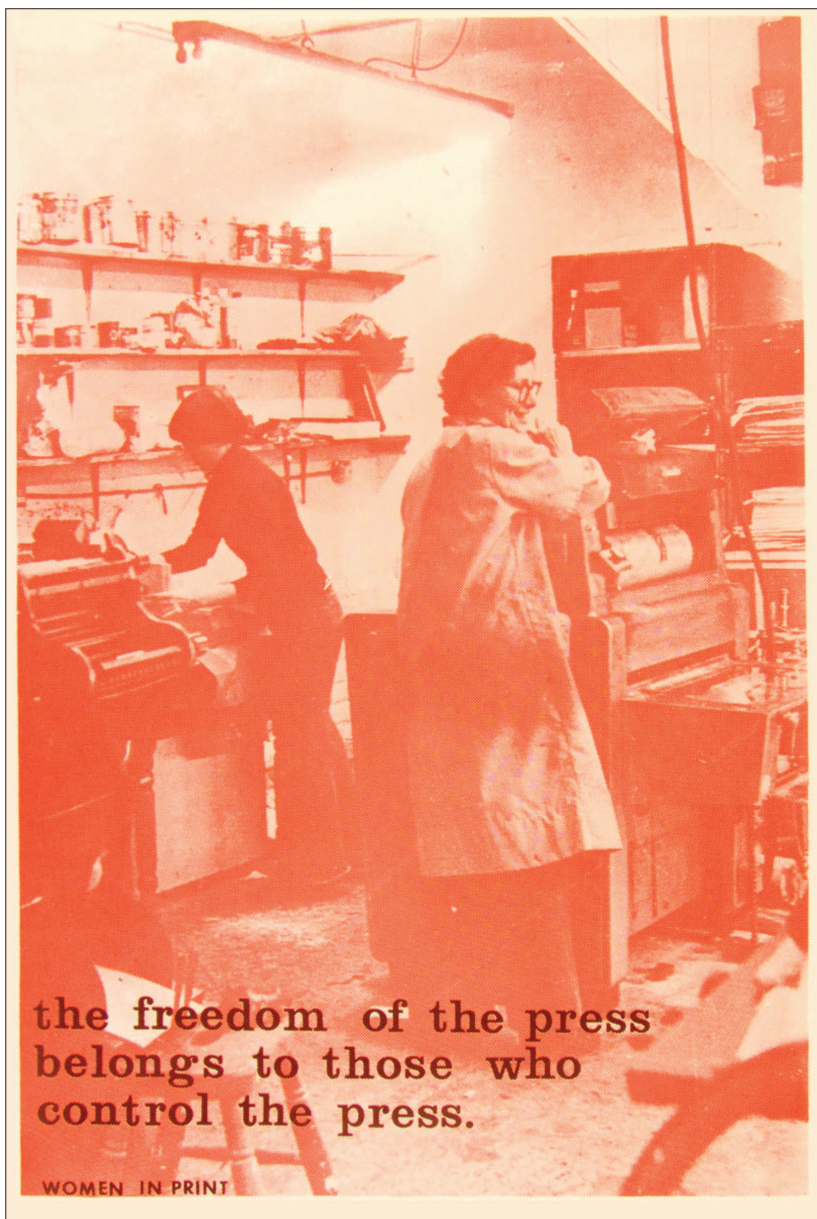


Figure 1. See Red poster (c1976). The Freedom of the Press. Image courtesy of the author.

the 1950s and '60s, where many early printshop members first encountered the process. Small offset was marketed as office equipment; 'so simple even a woman could learn it' read a trade advertisement at the time (Zeitlyn 1974). The relevant elements of the cultural-political developments are approximately as follows: the emergence of a libertarian left, the development of 'second wave' feminism and the rise of community activism (Saunders 1974, Segal 1980). The new radicalisms extended the sites of struggle to the home, school, health service, neighbourhood, environment and so on, as well as to cultural forms and practices. This period also saw the resurgence of worker co-operatives in the UK (Cockerton *et al.* 1980, Mellor *et al.* 1988).

Most of the printshops were initially informed by a politically charged ethos of 'self-help' (DIY), access and participation — and non-hierarchical organisation. The printshops were not just about producing content but were also concerned with the enactment of radically democratic politics within the organisations themselves. This 'everyday practice' or 'prefigurative politics' was central to much of the political organising described above (Boggs 1986, MacCabe 2007). The theory, expressed by Carole Pateman (1970), was that democratic participation in everyday activities and especially in the workplace was 'educative', providing the necessary disposition for creating a truly democratic society. It can also of course be seen in the more explicitly Gramscian terms as part of the attempt, by various strands of post-1968 radicalism, to create a viable counter-hegemony.

The principle of skill sharing was central to the printshops and operated on two levels. Firstly, for a number of groups, this principle was part of a broader turn to an aspect of local activism, whereby 'radicals in almost all professions were agitating to ensure their skills were available to working class people' (Kenna *et al.* 1986: 8). Part of the ambition was to 'de-mystify' and open up areas of knowledge that would in turn empower 'communities' to organise independently (Zeitlyn 1974). The second trajectory relates to skill specialisation within an organisation.

Many workers collectives of the 1970s and '80s, including some of the printshops, held an anti-specialisation ethos expressed through the practice of some sort of 'job rotation'. This meant that members needed to learn all aspects of the process. Specialisation was construed by some as 'monopolisation of knowledge', and therefore a potential 'instrument of power' (Rothschild and Whitt 1986: 105). Job rotation, in theory, distributes power/knowledge, and helps to create the conditions for equal engagement in decision-making processes. Additionally it provides a varied, less monotonous and alienated work life.

All the printshops printed for a diverse range of radical, political, cultural and community organisations; however, work that breached the basic principles of either the group as a whole or an individual member would, at the least, be discussed if not rejected. Political perspectives of members within different organisations usually shared some common left or left-libertarian ground; anti-capitalist, anti-hierarchy, pro-feminist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist and so on, but were by no means unified. Some members had worked previously as printers, a significant number had been to art school and most had been involved in some sort of political/community activity. Given their background, the printshops need to be seen as part of networks of political and cultural activists, publishers and distributors, facilitating a considerable amount of radical and community print media.

The following extract from an early 1970s radical print manual (*Print: How You Can Do It*) is illustrative of some of the early intentions. It states that 'The powerful world of professional print can undermine the rest of us by making us passive consumers.' But that,

Using minimal techniques described here, we can produce good results by ourselves, in an un-alienated way. The reader and producer are neighbours, we can learn from each other and start the collective task of re-inventing our own culture. While we learn the limitations and capabilities of the machine we develop our own language (Zeitlyn 1974: 3).



The discourse here is structured around a series of distinctive elements: community, culture, participation, empowerment, self-determination and self-help. The presentation of the technology as simple and therefore easy for anyone to learn ('minimal techniques'), signals its participatory and democratic potential. The printing press is enrolled as a comrade-in-arms in the creation of a new social imaginary.

The proliferation of the printshops was such that by the mid 1980s, in London alone, there were about 30 workshops still operating collectively, mostly formed as worker cooperatives, and financially surviving — and paying some sort of wages — either by operating 'commercially' (primarily for campaigning, community and alternative arts organisations) or being supported by grants. Funding grants came from Left-Labour run local authorities, the Greater London Council's (GLC) Community Arts and Women's sub-committees, Greater London Arts (GLA) or in the case of one printshop in particular (Union Place), the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Although many, but not all, of the printshops had started on a self-help or DIY basis, three basic printshop models emerged: radical service printers, community/self-help printers and poster collectives. The radical service printers were economically self-sufficient and provided print (and sometimes design) for the types of groups indicated above. Community/self-help printshops aimed to be participatory workshops for use by local groups and were supported by grants (from the funding bodies listed previously). Poster collectives tended to be relatively self-contained groups that designed and printed their own political posters.<sup>1</sup> Some, such as See Red (1974-1990) received funding for part of their existence, others, such as Poster Collective (1972-1990) maintained economic independence and operated on a voluntary basis throughout. So in the main, most places had to negotiate their survival and identities in relation to either their 'customer base', or the priorities of the various funding organisations that supported them. For a combination of reasons the printshops had all but disappeared by the mid 1990s. The



research this article is drawn from explores these reasons. As might be expected, the explanation can be found in a series of interconnected factors relating to membership, finance, technological developments, skills, working relations and a significantly changed political and cultural (and funding) context.

## **FEMINIST PRINTSHOPS**

Now to turn to the specific example of feminist printshops. These also existed in the different forms listed above, i.e. service printers, community printshops and poster collectives. Their aims and practices shared the general ethos and practices referred to earlier—specifically, anti-hierarchical organisation, skill sharing and the desire to facilitate the production of politically and culturally radical materials. However, there was an additional dimension. The feminist printshops also construed printing as a challenge to male dominance. Not only did having control of a press give them the power to produce feminist material (autonomy) but also ‘mastering’ traditionally male identified technology was perceived as both personally empowering and a step towards dismantling limiting constructions of gender (See Red 1980, Kenna *et al.* 1986, Jackson 1987, Chester *et al.* 1981). Learning to print was in a sense a feminist action, in a similar way to learning other conventionally male skills and to some extent tapped into the broader feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s, whereby many projects and classes were set up by and for women to learn typically male trades in women-only environments (Cockburn 1983, Segal 1980). For instance, in 1975 the feminist ‘Women in Manual Trades’ group was established, holding well-attended national conferences for many years. Their poster (Figure 2) not only encourages a working class woman ‘to learn a trade, because it’s better paid’ but also critiques the reasons women are discouraged or excluded from traditionally male areas of employment.



Figure 2. Women & Manual Trades poster. Image courtesy of the author.

The majority of the women-only printshop collectives were self-sufficient service printers who printed for a range of radical and community organisations but prioritised feminist groups. Examples included Women in Print (London), Moss Side Community Press (Manchester) and Sheffield Women's Printing Co-operative. However, the organisations I will be focusing on here – See Red Women's Workshop and Lenthall Road Workshop – became recipients of grant aid and as such were not dependant on their printing services for wages.

The two particular groups under discussion both started as women's collectives in London in the 1970s. Lenthall Road Workshop (LRW) began in 1975 and See Red Women's Workshop (See Red) in 1974. LRW eventually folded in the mid 1990s; See Red ceased operations in 1990. Although each group had a different focus (LRW was a community printshop and See Red was a poster collective) and at various points would represent distinct strands of feminist politics, what they had in common throughout was the desire to facilitate or create alternative media that challenged mainstream assumptions about women and that represented women's actual lives and experiences. Each also wanted to provide images that 'empowered' women.

### **LENTHALL ROAD WORKSHOP (LRW)**

LRW (which produced the Women & Manual Trades poster shown in Figure 2) was started by three women in dilapidated council-owned premises, for which they paid a low rent and where the workshop stayed until the end. Although they started without any funding, gradually LRW received grants from Arts Council of Great Britain, Greater London Arts Association (GLAA), Greater London Council (GLC) and Hackney Council to pay for wages and fixed operating costs. LRW facilitated screen-printing and photography access for a range of community and feminist groups and ran classes in both techniques for different women's and girls' groups. They also produced some of their own feminist posters.



By the time of this statement the collective itself was composed of all black women, mostly from working class backgrounds. In the same article the LRW says that this was a deliberate policy<sup>2</sup> to try and reflect — and thus make the workshop more welcoming to — women from the local black and working class communities of Hackney ‘who were under-using our resource’. This comment and action is an acknowledgment of the disjunction that often occurred between those running community projects and a considerable proportion of the intended ‘recipients’. The fact that the workshop received funding for wages, and as such removed the reliance on voluntary labour was, it



Figure 4. LRW posters. Stay Warm / Hasbudak. Images courtesy of the author.

can be argued, important for the attempt to change this dynamic. The early printshops were to a significant extent supported by the ‘squatting and claiming’ culture of the libertarian left (Landry *et al.* 1985), which although in principle was open to all, in reality tended to be dominated by (white) middle class ex-students, often with no dependents. Funding



for wages potentially opened up participation to those who had to earn a wage, pay rent, support dependants, in other words most ‘ordinary’ people. Grant support however brought its own problems, which will be briefly discussed toward the end of this article.

The move by LRW to address both the membership and range of women who felt welcome in the workshop resonated with wider debates in the women’s movement in which feminist theories, organisations and groups were being challenged about how women’s experience was defined, who was defining it and from what position. (A well-known example would be the criticisms levied at the National Abortion Campaign (NAC), a significant UK feminist organisation of the 1970s; minority women were, in fact, often pressurised into abortion or sterilisation by racist policies, and the NAC slogan ‘Abortion on Demand’ raised the issue of ‘*for whom?*’.) Women were not equally excluded nor were all women misrepresented in the same ways. The issues of representation and recognition *amongst* women was to become a defining feature of 1980s feminist discourse and as such permeated the women-only printshops, albeit in different ways and to different degrees.

LRW continued to receive government funding until the early 1990s but each year the money available decreased and eligibility criteria became more complex. Without sufficient income for wages, the workshop gradually petered out. In its final phase, according to former printshop members that I interviewed, it was essentially a one-woman enterprise printing t-shirts and other merchandise for the commercial lesbian scene. This reflects the direction of at least some strands of feminist creative energy in the early 1990s. The context in which LRW had started in the 1970s and then developed in the 1980s (with support from the municipal socialism of Hackney Council) had radically altered. Not only had this period witnessed ten years of Thatcherism and the dismantling of state funded services and community provision, but it also was host to an increasingly exhausted women’s movement.

## **SEE RED WOMEN'S WORKSHOP**

See Red was started by a group of women in about 1974 and was a poster collective that designed and screen-printed feminist posters. They also took on design and printing for women's and community groups. They existed without funding until 1982, supporting themselves through part-time work elsewhere, state benefits, cheap housing and poster sales. See Red shared premises—which they entirely fitted out and plumbed themselves, both as a point of pride and for economic reasons—with the feminist offset litho collective Women in Print. Despite their limited funds See Red produced a considerable range of feminist posters covering a wide range of issues, from general consciousness raising calls, to critiques of the media and sexist advertising, to posters about the disappeared in Latin America, support for women in various national liberation struggles from Ireland to Zimbabwe and so on. The posters were produced and sold as cheaply as possible (See Red 1980). The text from this notice put out in 1974 describes the collective's initial aims and position:

We are a recently formed group of women interested in visual aspects of the Women's Struggle. We want to combat images of the "model woman" which are used by capitalist ideology to keep women from disputing their secondary status or questioning their role in a male dominated society. Any women interested are welcome to come round and meet us and to use our facilities and learn printing methods.

Female oppression is understood from a socialist feminist perspective, and part of the way to combat it is for women themselves to develop an alternative and critical counter-media. The issue of solidarity with other women's struggles was important, as were homegrown campaigns against cuts to state services and against racist groups such as the National Front. Posters were designed to both raise consciousness and empower.

These posters (Figure 5) indicate the collective's early socialist orientation. In the UK, unlike the US, a significant number of women





**Figure 5.** See Red posters. Capitalism / The Women Are Not Free. Images courtesy of the author.

who were active in the women's liberation movement had also been involved in left politics, and part of their struggle had been to persuade their male comrades to take feminist politics seriously (Rowbottom 2001, Segal 1980, Lent 2001). Both of these posters connect feminism to socialist analysis and as such indicate to some extent the audience they are addressing.

Figure 6 shows two examples of the 'solidarity' posters, both of which were produced in collaboration with women's groups organising around



Figure 6. See Red posters. Latin America / Armagh. Images courtesy of the author.



Figure 7. See Red posters. Sexist Adverts / Lovable. Images courtesy of the author.

those struggles. The posters in Figure 7 relate to the problem of mass media and offer solutions: turn it off or get the spray can out! Graffitiing or otherwise altering of sexist advertisements was a regular feminist activity. (Photographic postcards of the resulting improvements were often disseminated through alternative and feminist bookshops.)<sup>3</sup>

See Red also produced a series of women's health posters including 'Our Body' (Figure 8). Another poster in the series gave straightforward information about making contraception choices. Self-determination in relation to the female body was a central principle of 1970s feminism and this in turn demanded knowledge about one's own body. In 1971, the Boston Women's Health Collective published the manual *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, which would become a key resource for numerous women's groups and individuals in both the US and the UK, and from which the See Red poster no doubt takes its title. (Note too that it is not 'your body', but 'our body'. This is not an infantilisation but an address

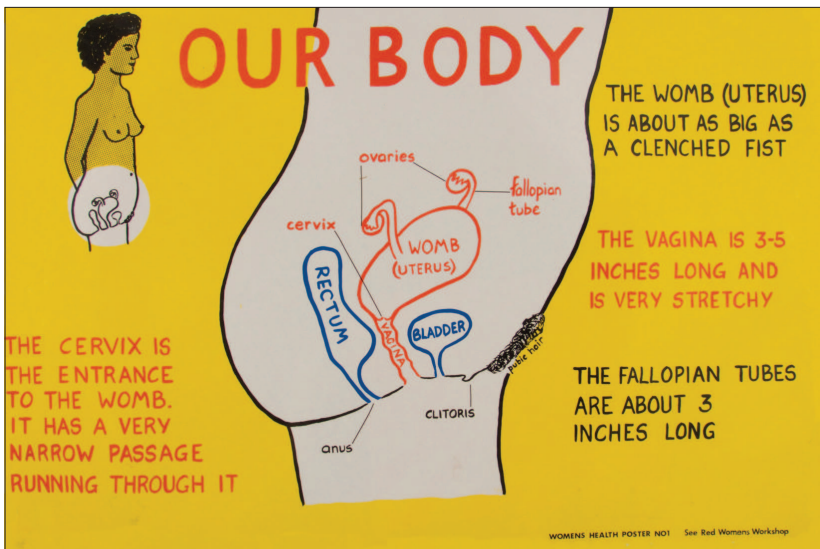


Figure 8. See Red poster. Our Body. Image courtesy of the author.

from within, and to, a collective female body). The women's health movement was another example of radical professionals working at a grassroots level, sharing and 'de-mystifying' their knowledge in order to empower others. The See Red posters were aimed at women and girls, and were used by a wide range of health groups and centres as well as youth clubs across the UK.

Many of the early See Red collective members had been to art school and similarly to those involved in the community printshops, were to some extent aligned to a wider leftist and feminist critique of the 'institutions of culture' and their value systems of taste, genius, legitimacy and presumed universality. See Red members were among those activists who had rejected an individualised creative practice and put their skills to collective poster making in order to further the aims of feminist politics. In an interview with the feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, one member states: 'It's taken us several years to get over the ideas drummed into us at art school – like the idea of an artist having some magical quality – the creator. Deciding to work collectively is a way of challenging the idea of the artist as a self engrossed individualist' (See Red 1980: 53). Furthermore, the posters that they produced were explicitly not to be seen as works of art, but as accessible objects of consciousness raising and empowerment and therefore, were intended to be produced and distributed as cheaply and widely as possible (See Red 1980).

See Red received Greater London Council funding for wages and rent from 1982 to 1986, ending when the Thatcher administration disbanded the GLC. Again resonating with debates within the women's movement, the promise of wages raised the issue about the 'who' of collective membership. For some workers, this provided an opening to include more women whom they felt would not have been able to otherwise participate. A difficult period ensued, not least because the continued involvement of the women who had built up the workshop and poster catalogue over the preceding eight years was challenged by the insistence of some more recent members that the new, paid positions

should be entirely occupied by black and working class women. This period in the workshop's history has been described by one former member as indicative of a 'very boxed-in form of identity politics' within the broader UK Women's Liberation Movement (Robinson 2011), which by the early 1980s had changed significantly. Lesbians had become more dominant on the feminist cultural scene and in many organisations, and as such, campaigns relating to domestic labour and to some extent reproductive rights seemed to hold little personal relevance. The explicit socialism of earlier feminist activity had been marginalised from different directions. A case in point was the changing of the text in one of the above See Red posters by later members of the collective from 'capitalism also depends on domestic labour' to 'a service a day and he'll work, rest and play'. The new rendition adapts a slogan from mass visual culture (capitalist advertising) not as a critique of that form, but to create a message with a populist and humorous address primarily to women. The sense of solidarity with the male 'worker' is noticeably absent. Lastly, in terms of the changes within the feminist movement during the 1980s, a significant amount of energy was directed towards making challenges within it. However, unlike the recognition by the National Abortion Campaign in the 1970s that a woman's right to choose *must* 'preclude the possibility of racist population politics' (Hoggart 2010), the 1980s-era internal politics of the women's movement did not always result in analysis and activism that confronted broader political and social structures (Mirza 1997).

During the period See Red was grant-aided (1982-1986) and until its final demise, no new posters were added to the catalogue, although the collective sustained production of many of those that had been previously designed. They continued to print work for local campaigns and women's groups and also set up, with local schools, a poster design and printing scheme for girls. The reason for the lack of new posters is not entirely clear, and was no doubt due to a combination of elements, some of which may be related to issues raised in the previous section.



However one factor stated by ex-members was that being grant-aided required significant amounts of administration, and none of the workers were experienced in this area, making it a time consuming and arduous task. To some extent, it seems that being grant-aided actually served to defeat the original intentions of the workshop. After 1986, while continuing to fill a diminishing number of orders from the See Red catalogue, the collective endeavored to reinvent the service printing aspect under another name, printing products to be purchased by an emergent, more consumer-orientated lesbian and gay culture. (Not so different from the fate of LRW). Despite a sustained attempt, the remaining members simply did not have the capital resources nor, they now reflect, the entrepreneurial acumen to succeed commercially. Not only this but, for their typical customer base, screen-printing was also increasingly seen as an expensive form of print especially compared to photocopying. Finally, many of the groups that had previously used See Red for service printing had also lost grant aid and had either folded, or were operating on minimal resources.

## **CONCLUSION**

Both of these collectives were committed to social change through the use of print media. Key to both groups was the issue of access—LRW through developing the participatory ethos of community media and See Red through a commitment to creating and distributing counter media as cheaply as possible. Each reflected significant aspects of the changing politics and critical debates of the late twentieth century women's movement in the UK. Both engaged with different local groups and struggles and each opened up their workshops to schoolchildren. Their posters did not just adorn the walls of communal kitchens in Islington squats and student unions, but also featured in youth clubs and law, health and advice centres. Both groups actively considered not only who their audiences and users were and could be,

but also how this was reflected in their own membership. Similar to other feminist organisations of their time, they were also acutely aware of the practical constraints to ‘participation’, including those related to childcare. LRW, for example, stated as a specific problem that they were ‘at present unable to provide a safe space for a crèche on site for our users’ (Kenna *et al.* 1986: 37). Within the women’s movement disabled women had not only drawn attention to their representation as victims but also to the real, practical problem of physical access to spaces. This resulted in a widespread practice of stating explicit access details on publicity materials, as well as consideration of the suitability of venues for events. Again, the women’s printshops within their specific constraints attempted to address this (Kenna *et al.* 1986).

There has been much interest and enthusiasm in recent years about the participatory, collaborative and activist potential offered by ‘new media’ technologies. This is not to be dismissed by any means, and several ex-members of the printshop collectives whom I interviewed said ‘if only we’d had the internet’ or words to that effect. As Kevin Howley observes ‘the notions of access and participation so thoroughly embedded in the discourse of new media’ (2010: 6) have always been an intrinsic part of both the practice and literature of community media. For the organisations discussed above this was extended by the debates of the women’s movement. I do not wish to hold these groups up as an ideal of the feminist discourses that informed them, especially when the focus on ‘who is doing’ came at the expense of ‘what is being done’ (Mirza 1997: 9). However if what excites us about the development and use of digital networked technologies is that they seem to signal some kind of democratic potential, we *still do* have to ask who that demos includes. Looking to examples of previous attempts at facilitating democratic, participatory alternatives to dominant media forms and practices may enrich both our critique and our aspirations.



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## NOTES

1. This distinctions were not absolute by any means, there was a cross-over of activity between the three types of group, as will be become apparent in the case studies discussed.
2. This is contradicted somewhat in interviews with two ex-members who said that in their memory this actually happened much more organically.
3. The photographer Jill Posner was a significant if not the main person behind this; she in turn had been associated with LRW.

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